

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter by the Abbot General OCist for the MFC – 27.08.2012

"Have you no fear of God at all? You got the same sentence as he did." (Luke 23,40)  
Let us start from this "reproach" by the good thief to his companion. Perhaps beforehand they were accomplices in banditry, and for this reason condemned together. Luke is clear that they were crucified "one on the right, the other on the left" of Jesus (Luke 23,33). Thus, Jesus separates them, but he is also the last thing they have in common, of which they speak about together. The so-called "bad thief" listens without comment to what his companion says. Who knows if in this silence the mercy of God has not penetrated his heart?...

There are those who think that the good thief was converted by seeing the Mother of God at the foot of the Cross. The Gospel writers do not say this. But if we go to the beginning of Luke's gospel, we find that Mary had, in a certain way, prophesied the salvation of the good thief. Where? In the *Magnificat*, where it is said: "His mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear him" (Luke 1,50; cf. Ps 102,17).

Mary shows us the mercy of God as if it were a blanket spread by God over his naked children, trembling with cold and full of shame, like Adam and Eve after the original sin, and the fear of God is the attitude that allows the Father to express his maternal attention towards us. At the end of his gospel, Luke, the Gospel writer of Mercy, wants to remind us that this blanket is not only for good children, and that the fear of God is a truth of the relationship with God that can manifest itself in the most perfect way even in a man who is morally the most imperfect, just like the thief. He reminds us that the mercy of God is truly the love of the heart of God for those who are wretched.

When the good thief invites his companion to the fear of God, he does it by reminding him that he is "condemned to the same sentence" (Luke 23,40). In itself, his reasoning is strange. Why should he, faced by Jesus condemned to death on a cross like him, feel the fear of God? But the good thief expresses a judgment of faith, he makes an act of faith. Faith in the divinity of Jesus: Jesus is the God whom his companion must "fear", respect and recognise precisely as God. And faith in the redemption, faith in the mystery of the kenosis of a God who allows himself to be "condemned" to the same penalty as the worst criminals, criminals who in the eyes of the world would merit the death penalty, the cross, the most ignominious penalty there is.

The good thief calls his companion to recognise and believe that the sign of the divinity of Jesus is not power, impassibility, but love which makes him be subjected to and share our penalty although he did not have in him any fault, any sin to expiate. In a way, the good thief does not speak just as thief to thief, but as man to man, and as man to all men, because the penalty to which Jesus is innocently condemned is not only that which both thieves merit, but that which is merited by all sinners, by the whole of humanity.

By recognising that Jesus is subjected without any personal fault to the penalty due to all our faults, the good thief understands that it is not a matter of winning salvation, but of receiving the merciful gratuitousness of God who is suffering and giving it to all.

What seems to me to be fundamental to understand the Christian sense of the fear of God and also the sense that it has in saint Benedict's Rule, is that from now on, from the Cross, it is no longer the power of God which must arouse the fear of God but his weakness, the weakness of the Cross, the foolishness of the Cross as saint Paul says in the first letter to the Corinthians (1Cor 1,18-2,5). The person who first understood and announced this mystery is the good thief. Today, the true fear of God is the faith in the love of God who became weak and miserable until death on the Cross to save us. And the fruit of this fear of God is essentially mercy, forgiveness, and salvation.

Saint Benedict expresses the Christian truth of the fear of God by inviting us to "never despair of God's mercy" (RB 4,74), which is the last and perhaps the summit of "the instruments of good works" that he enumerates in the fourth chapter of the Rule.

Thus Mary and the good thief express, both of them with astonishment, the same consciousness that the fear of God and God's mercy are linked in the mystery of Christ, by the mystery of Christ. Mary speaks from the school of the Psalms; the good thief in more "legalistic" terms: he is used to describe life in terms of guiltiness and condemnation. Both, however, talk in terms of faith, contemplating with amazement the mystery of the Son of God who humbles himself to become man and save us.

This link that Mary and the good thief put between the fear of God and the mercy of God, is to my mind, an essential point, not to be forgotten, to understand and live the Rule, because as we shall see, it is precisely in this sense that for saint Benedict, the fear of God is necessary and fundamental to live in humility and to fulfil numerous tasks and responsibilities in community.

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